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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/IRAQ: DUTCH WITHDRAWAL POSITION  
HARDENING

Classified By: AMBASSADOR CLIFFORD SOBEL FOR REASONS 1.4(B) AND (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The Dutch government is determined to end the current deployment of Dutch troops in Al-Muthanna in mid-March in accordance with assurances provided to parliament last June. Defense Minister Kamp will send a letter to parliament in the next two weeks reaffirming that Dutch forces will leave Al-Muthanna on schedule. Key reasons include preserving opposition party support for peacekeeping operations in general, freeing up capacity for other operations, and the strong conviction that The Netherlands has already done more than its share in Iraq. The Dutch are also determined not to repeat the disaster of Srebrenica, which many attribute to the Dutch failure to set a clear exit strategy and stick to it. The Foreign and Defense ministers would like a smaller Dutch presence in Iraq to continue under the auspices of the NATO and EU training missions. The British and Japanese are pushing the Dutch to remain in Al-Muthanna in a more limited capacity, but face stiff opposition. There is little evident support in the Dutch government, parliament, or public for a further extension (although a delay in holding elections might also delay the Dutch departure slightly.) While the Dutch do not want to disengage entirely from Iraq, there is a deeply-felt need to close the chapter on the Al-Muthanna mission before even beginning to consider a possible future deployment outside the NATO and EU context. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) Dutch Defense Minister Kamp and other senior Dutch officials are increasingly firm in reaffirming that the Dutch deployment in Al-Muthanna will conclude at the end of its current extension on March 15. In Iraq, Kamp recently announced after meeting with IIG MP Allawi that "staying longer is no option," noting that having 1,400 troops in the region for 20 months had been a "major effort." On October 27, Kamp told Ambassador Sobel that he intended to send a letter to parliament in the next two weeks making clear that the deployment will end on schedule; the letter is expected to prompt a debate in parliament on Dutch involvement in Iraq. According to Kamp, the need to maintain solid and broad support in parliament is a major driving factor in the government's deliberations. He was adamant that a significant majority -- including the main opposition party -- is necessary to endorse military deployments; forcing a decision on an extension with a small parliamentary majority ("fifty percent plus one") could have serious negative repercussions in the future deployments. Kamp also stressed that the Dutch feel overextended with forces in Afghanistan and Bosnia, and need flexibility to deal with other contingencies. (A parliamentary contact told us separately that many members would like to see the Dutch become more active in Africa. End Note.) Kamp acknowledged that a slip in the election schedule might justify a slight extension of the Dutch deployment, but only by a matter of weeks.

3. (C) Dutch MFA POLDIR Hugo Siblesz separately told Ambassador Sobel on October 27 that Foreign Minister Bot and Defense Minister Kamp had met the previous evening to discuss the Dutch presence in Iraq and to agree on the contents of the government letter to parliament. According to Siblesz, Bot and Kamp were in agreement that the current Dutch deployment in Al-Muthanna would end on March 15 barring extraordinary and unforeseen circumstances. Only a delay in holding the elections, Siblesz said, might convince the Dutch to stay in Al-Muthanna longer, and then only for a "very limited time" (e.g., a few weeks at most.)

4. (C) Siblesz stressed that Kamp and Bot considered the government bound by its commitment to parliament last June that the current extension of the Dutch mission would be the last. There is no discernible interest in parliament or among the Dutch public for extending the mission beyond March, and the coalition government is in no position to be seen going back on its word. In addition, the Dutch are increasingly worried that an open-ended commitment in a deteriorating security environment could lead to another Srebrenica-type disaster, which must be avoided at all costs. Many in The Netherlands blamed the Srebrenica disaster on the Dutch government's failure to set and stick to a clear exit strategy. Siblesz noted that appeals to the Dutch based on the fact that no one else is prepared to take on the Dutch mission were therefore likely to backfire.

15. (C) On the other hand, Siblesz said that Bot and Kamp were committed to maintaining a Dutch "presence" in Iraq after March, albeit in a different form. The Dutch decision to end its current deployment should not be seen as a desire to distance The Netherlands from the U.S. or a sign of dissatisfaction with the Iraqi mission. According to Siblesz, the Dutch are prepared to contribute trainers to the NATO training mission in Iraq (Siblesz suggested a "few dozen") and also a security contingent (approximately 130 troops in total). Kamp separately indicated that the Dutch are also prepared to contribute to a future EU training mission.

16. (C) According to the British Embassy here, the British are actively engaged in seeking to convince the Dutch to remain in Al-Muthanna, but recognize that they face stiff opposition. British efforts are currently focused on the possibility of retaining a smaller Dutch contingent in Al-Muthanna supported by other, non-Dutch forces. According to the British Ambassador, even such a limited Dutch presence would depend on "unforeseen" developments occurring to justify the extension. (FM Bot reportedly told FM Straw that it will not be possible to claim that events were "unforeseen" unless they occur closer to the proposed date of departure, i.e. in January or February.) PM Blair is expected to approach PM Balkenende on this issue on October 29 on the margins of the signing ceremony for the EU Constitutional Treaty in Rome. The Japanese have also been very active (Kamp told us that he has had six different meetings with the Japanese Ambassador on this issue) but are pessimistic on the prospects of a continued Dutch presence. Kamp will travel to Tokyo in the next few weeks, where he intends to "explain" to the Japanese why the Dutch feel impelled to end their Al-Muthanna deployment, and why the task of finding a replacement force (assuming the Iraqis are not ready to take this task on themselves) is, in Dutch eyes, primarily a British responsibility.

COMMENT:

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17. (C) Since August, Kamp has been consistent in stating that the current deployment would end as scheduled on March 15. Bot also appears to be determined to stick to ending the deployment on schedule barring extraordinary circumstances. Given the fact that there is no discernible public or parliamentary support for a further extension (other than a few op-ed pieces focusing on the humanitarian costs to the Iraqi people), it is not surprising that PM Balkenende has so far shown no willingness to take the political heat of pressing his cabinet to break the government's "promise" to parliament by proposing an extension. It is worth noting that in the Dutch system, the Prime Minister (technically the "Minister for General Affairs") is expected to build consensus positions between independent ministers rather than force decisions on the cabinet. (All ministers -- including Balkenende -- technically report directly to the crown.)

18. (C) As a mission, we have been extremely active in the past few weeks canvassing government and parliamentary contacts (including the floor leaders and foreign policy spokesmen of all coalition parties and the primary opposition parties) on the political implications of an additional Dutch extension in Al-Muthanna. Nearly all assess that such a move would have serious negative repercussions for the coalition government and would make it difficult to develop support for future peacekeeping operations. With the exception of the parliamentary leadership of the conservative Liberal Party (Kamp's own party), the mood in parliament is firmly against an extension. Technically, we cannot rule out the possibility of the government winning a slim majority for an extension, but only if Balkenende and perhaps Bot undertake a major effort to strong-arm their Christian Democrat Party into advocating an extension. The government, however, is firmly committed to obtaining a super majority and appears unlikely to change. The more limited, NATO and EU-linked missions described by Siblesz would face far fewer hurdles gaining parliamentary approval as they can be presented as "new" missions based on "new" realities. Such missions, in the government's view, would prove that the Dutch remain actively engaged in supporting Iraqi reconstruction without breaking faith with parliament or jeopardizing the consensus on overseas deployments. It is clear, however, that before the Dutch will consider an additional national mission to Iraq, they feel they must first decisively close the book on the Al-Muthanna mission.

19. (C) Baghdad minimize considered.